



Introduction: Cities built from the dreams of women

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What does it mean, asks Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't*, that each of the cities in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* has the name of a woman? How does one circulate in the city when one is a figure for the city? Calvino's city of Zobeide, for example, is founded upon a dream, a dream shared by men of various nations. The men dream of a woman running through the streets of an unknown city at night, her hair streaming down her back; they pursue her but never find her. After the dream, they seek in vain to find the city, and end up building and re-building a city whose configuration of avenues and walls would stop the woman from escaping if ever she reappeared. The problem, of course, is that the city comes to resemble a trap. "Zobeide, a city built from a dream of woman," de Lauretis writes, "must be constantly rebuilt to keep woman captive. The city is a representation of woman; woman, the ground of that representation.... Thus the city, which is built to capture men's dream, finally only inscribes woman's absence" (12-13).

If every woman in Scarborough went out after dark every single night it wouldn't be the women, it would be the rapist who would be afraid.... The problem is the plan of the neighbourhood. The layout of the streets is a deadly maze. They're designed for cars. They're designed for drivers. I can't afford a car, can you afford a car, who can afford a car. – Patricia Seaman, Toronto.

The city can be read as a trace of the desires of those who construct it – its poets and storytellers as much as its architects and bureaucrats. In this issue, the former not only expose the ideologies that subtend urban planning, traffic laws, the organization of the workplace, police protection, prostitution, "black on black" fashion, and so forth, they also offer an alternative map of the city, an alternative cartography of desire. As a space traditionally mapped by men's desire, by men's economic privilege, a space whose otherness is so much a part of the (male) onlooker that it inspires both fascination and revulsion, the city is a space

in which women do not circulate freely. This is not to suggest that women's relationship to urban culture is uniform or transhistorical. The particular knot of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and class that locates a woman in relations of power has a radical effect on the avenues open to her. Moreover, as I try to suggest in the collage that follows, contemporary women have engineered a variety of interventions in the prevailing representations of urban culture. Theirs is an ongoing struggle with a structure that is "constantly rebuilt to keep woman captive." In this sense, the story of Zobeide can be read as an allegory of historical shifts in the social imaginary that regulate women's access to culture.

Elle revoyait ce morceau de trottoir pour la millièème fois, elle si jeune en cette fin de siècle.... Elle n'a jamais visité de musée. Ni lu ni parlé d'art. Seul son corps s'expose sur la voie publique....

– Claudine Potvin, Calgary.

In his influential essay, "La peintre de la vie moderne," Charles Baudelaire characterizes "modern life" in terms of the accelerated pace of life of the city, the intense, fleeting encounters of strangers on its sidewalks, the anonymous press of the crowd, the parade of fashionable strollers, and the fugitive transactions of its money economy. However, as Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock have argued, women of the mid- to late-nineteenth century had a very different experience of modernity from that of men. From Wolff's perspective, one has only to look at Baudelaire's scrutiny of the women who venture alone into the streets of Paris (widows, prostitutes, lesbians) to understand that they do not have the *flâneur's* "freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed, but never interacting with others" (Wolff 39). Middle-class women were, of course, permitted to venture into the streets "to promenade, go shopping, or visiting or simply to be on display" (Pollock 68). But shopping, Wolff reminds us, is not strolling. The woman shopper circulates as a sign of her husband's wealth/desire (Wolff 46); the terms in which she inhabits the street are, in fact, continuous with those of her seeming moral opposite, the woman "for hire."

She calls you "vous" over the phone. You picture her / sitting at her desk at work / men standing around She is the *single* / woman to them / who always has other plans never / takes them up on their invitations. – Michelle Tracy, Montreal.

If the fantasy of strolling unnoticed in the city constructs the *flâneur* as a (heterosexual) man, why are there so many women figured in the work of writers such as Baudelaire and T.S. Eliot? Taking Wolff's argument in "The Invisible *Flâneuse*" a step further, I would suggest that scrutinizing women and their movements allows the *flâneur* to move freely and to assert his presence in the city while the woman at whom he looks remains mired in contradiction: both invisible and visible, absent and captive. In an urban culture of spectacle and display, putting women on display is in fact a way of regulating their movements – an analysis that asks us to rethink what it means to live under the sign of other marks, particularly those of race. Whereas a man's movement, his capacity to exercise his gaze, and his presence in the city is a function of his anonymity and invisibility, a woman's limited movement, her inability to return his gaze, and her historical absence (invisibility) in the city, can be understood as a function of her visibility.

En zone d'ombre / femme lente et longue / quitte le domicile
rompu sillonne les espaces inséparables / franchit la demeure
pénétrable / peuple le temps profond[.] – Andrée Lacelle, Ottawa.

The heroine of *Heroine* is able to rise out of her bathtub and stroll into the Montreal morning only once she has written the character-in-process script for the heroine of *her* novel. A process that develops out of the narrator's memories of a painful love affair, the collage of noise and sights outside her window, the visit from Marie, and the narrator's own sexual gratification. – Nicole Markotic, Calgary.

In many of the texts in this issue, women inhabit the streets with abandon. They circulate not as signs of men's wealth, desire, or alienation but as signs of their own desire and, what is more unthinkable, as signs of their desire for other women. The possibility of living that desire as a "positionality in discourse and social practice" (Pollock 66) without the constant scrutiny of men is one of their principal fantasies. If in these texts women are visible in the city, it is because they have made themselves visible and because they are *visible for each other*.

you are here. the three of us, conversation, gestures. women are dancing together. what it means when we can look and smile at each other.... what does the gaze mean when we are moving there

are no words between us anything can be said.... – Sybil Plank, Montreal.

... a couple comes in beside me / necking then another couple and I'm starting to feel lightheaded / not sure whether they notice or if it matters then a woman leans over puts her hand on / my chin pulls my head back and takes a good look she asks my name and I / tell her then she sticks her tongue as far down my throat as she can her / boyfriend says he is pleased to meet me[.] – Sina Queyras, Vancouver.

Insofar as the gaze of men does not have a monopoly over the scenes of looking, the visibility of women no longer functions as a mechanism of social regulation – that is, it no longer ensures the invisibility of women in the spheres of politics and culture. Moving about the city allows women to situate themselves in relation to its institutions and to its sites of pleasure, consumption, and display.

L'aisance de sa course avait fini par lui donner une impression de légèreté, lorsqu'elle s'est glissée de justesse dans l'autobus qui démarrait. Elle s'est laissée choir contre une fenêtre où, tandis que son sang se calmait, la ville s'est découpé en petits tableaux changeants, que contemplerait bientôt sa mère. D'avance elle avait honte de vivre là, d'accepter toutes les cruautés et les incivilités pathologiques, les aberrations qui n'étonnaient plus que les étrangers. – Madeleine Monette, New York.

Critics have identified two responses to the dizzying movement and unruly crowds of the city of modernity. According to Walter Benjamin in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," "no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth-century writers" (166) than that of the crowd, yet "[f]ear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it" (174). As Michael Long and Peter Collier point out in *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, a tension between fascination and recoil characterizes late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century representations of the city. Yet if the modern city is a nightworld of licence and fantasy, then whose licence and fantasy? And if it is a landscape of exile and alienation, then whose exile and alienation? The crowd, I would argue, is a (male) fantasy of otherness, an otherness upon which the subject relies in order to gaze

unscrutinized, and an otherness that both attracts and repels his gaze. Eliot, for example, cannot change the fact of the faceless crowd or the prostitutes, but he can transform them into signs of his alienation or his desire. In other words, he can restore some semblance of order by making them into correlatives of his own self-otherness.

I am writing you from Paris, Rm. 27 of l'Hôtel des Grandes Ecoles. I realize (finally? already?) that I am *many* voices, each seeking out the others, each desiring wholeness. Correspondence. The intricate mesh of temporality, temperament, and t'aimer (to-love-yourself-ness). I wind through courtyards, cobbled streets, musées, endless bistros, brasseries, the sites of my merging and splitting consciousness intersecting with culture, cultural difference and history.... – Margaret Christakos, Toronto.

What is the relationship of women writers to the male fantasies that organize urban social space? According to Susan Merrill Squier in her introduction to *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, women writing in the twentieth century, while equally ambivalent toward urban culture, have felt less threatened than their male colleagues by the disintegrating class and other social structures of a (patriarchal, imperialist) culture in ruins. "[W]hat emerges in examining women writers' vision of the city," writes Squier, "is that whether city experience is pleasurable or painful depends, in large part, on whether it allows them access to creativity and autonomy" (4). Comparing Katherine Mansfield's London with that of Eliot, for example, Sydney Janet Kaplan argues that "there is not the same quality of hopeless impersonality" (163) or the "cruel disdain" for women (165) one finds in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or *The Waste Land*. Mansfield's London is more often stimulating than alienating. But even when it tends toward the latter, Kaplan explains, "[r]ather than use her alienated city characters as symbols of the breakdown of Western civilization or as contrasts with the great figures of the past, Mansfield identifies with them" (165). In other words, she makes them figures of her cultural isolation and invisibility as a woman living in London.

Trottoirs brûlants. Dans le soleil, une église. Evidée, il ne reste que la charpente, c'est si beau. On voit la ville à travers elle, j'allais dire on voit le siècle, quelque chose est à recommencer. Un monde. – Bianca Côté, Montreal.

In the texts that follow, the city does not serve as a screen onto which the subject projects self-otherness. Because the urban *corps* is not the symptom of a mind-body split, it is not a site of the fascination-alienation that characterizes much twentieth-century city writing by men. Driving or walking in the city is more a *sensory* experience than a psychical one, and the goal (for the city and its subjects) is, in the words of Nicole Brossard, a "*corps habité*" (*French Kiss* 14).

Montréal is, as Marchessault writes, "*une ville médiumnique*." ... For her doubled narration works not to compound the effect of dissociation and fragmentation in images of the city but to read one image though another in a fluid interconnection, an enfolding of one within the other by means of apostrophe, litany, parataxis that plays out to excess the trope of the city as place of passage, exchange and transformation. – Barbara Godard, Toronto.

Conceptualizing the city as a system of signs more than a symbolic landscape of the mind makes it possible to rewrite or remap the city, to give it an alternative reality. To map the city as a body and to track desiring women across its surfaces is to intervene in a received set of values and meanings. A map, after all, is co-extensive with a material reality, and its particular configuration of signs, routes, buildings, obstacles, and intersections is a function of political and economic interests. In the texts that follow, the process of re-mapping the city is an effect not only of women walking its sidewalks and driving its streets, but also of the roving eye of the writer and reader. Each has a certain productivity in relation to dominant discourse and social practice, formations that are not without points of transit, change, and resistance.

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